BATMAN
STALKING THE CRIMESMITH!
444
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WOLFMAN
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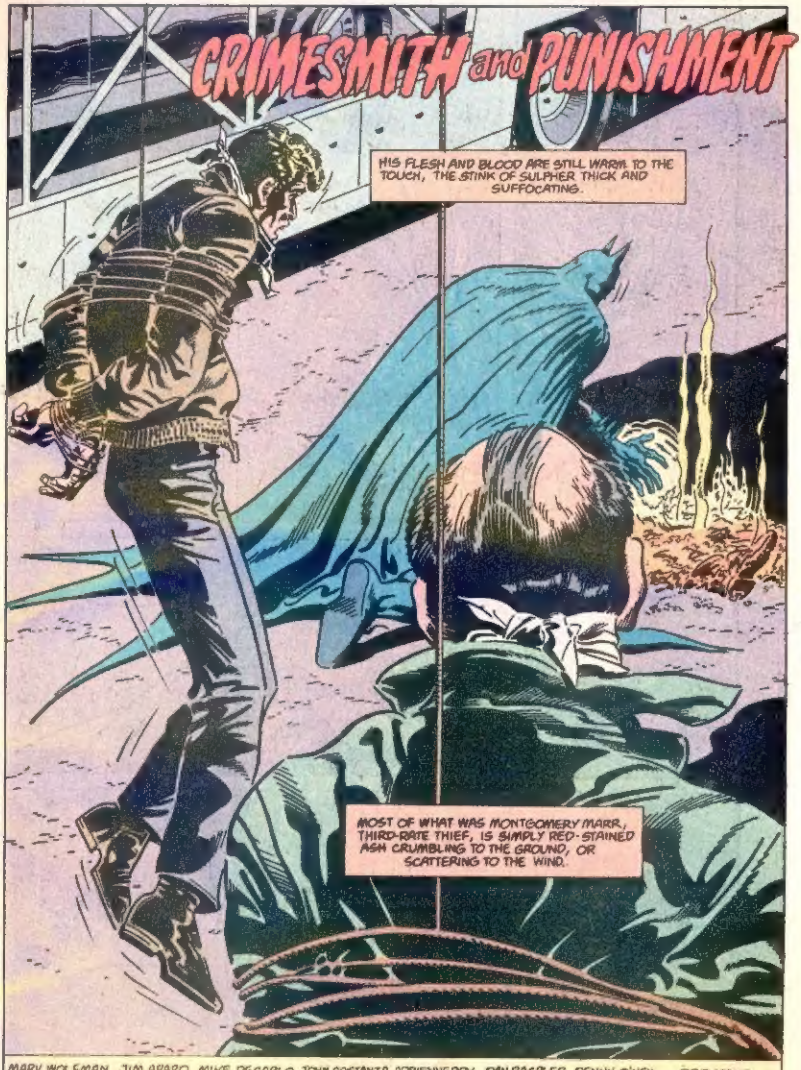
CRIMESMITH and PUNISHMENT
HIS FLESH AND BLOOD ARE STILL WARM TO THE TOUCH, THE STINK OF SULPHER THICK AND SUFFOCATING.
MOST OF WHAT WAS MONTGOMERY MARR, THIRD-RATE THIEF, IS SIMPLY RED-STAINED ASH CRUMBLING TO THE GROUND, OR SCATTERING TO THE WIND.
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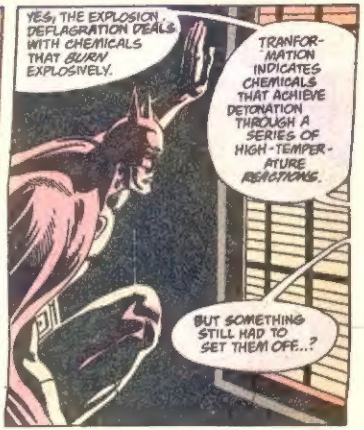
G-53B

GOOD GOD IN HEAVEN, YOU KILLED HIM!
WHY DID YOU KILL HIM? WHY?
HE BEGGED YOU NOT TO MAKE HIM TALK.
BUT YOU KEPT SWEATING HIM, MAN. YOU KEPT PUSHIN' AT 'IM 'TIL HE DIDN'T KNOW WHAT TO DO.
NOW 'CAUSE HE TALKED, HE'S DEAD.
WHO'S CRIMESMITH? WHO IS HE?
YOU CRAZY, MAN? YOU SAW WHAT HAPPENED TO MONTE WHEN YOU FORCED HIM TO JUST SAY HIS NAME.
I--I DON'T KNOW NOTHIN'! I'M GOIN' NOTHIN'!
HE KNOWS HIS RIGHTS, BATMAN.

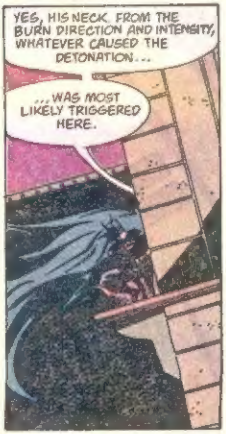
WE'LL TAKE OVER NOW.
DANA HANRAHAN, DETECTIVE, HOMICIDE.
HE KILLED MONTE. HE MADE 'IM SAY THE NAME THAT KILLED HIM.
TAKE HIM IN, TOO. HE'S A KILLER!
MONTE KEPT SAYIN' HE'D DIE IF HE TOLD ANYONE WHO WE WORKED FOR. BUT BATMAN DIDN'T CARE, MAN.
MONTE, HE DIDN'T KNOW WHAT TO DO. SO HE TALKED, THEN HE BLEW UP.
IS THAT TRUE?
HE'S DEAD.
YOU COULDN'T HAVE KNOWN.
AS I SAID...
...HE'S DEAD.

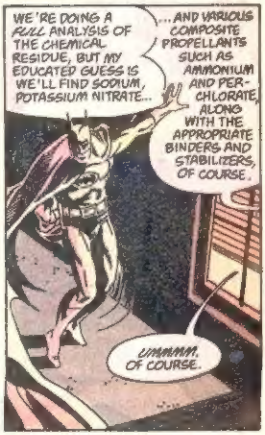
BRUCE, THE JUSTICE DEPARTMENT MAY HAVE CLEARED YOU OF ALL SPY-CHARGES...
...BUT THE NEGATIVE PUBLICITY TO WAYNETECH IS MORE DAMAGING THAN IS IMMEDIATELY APPARENT.
SUSPICION ALONE IS HURTING YOUR CHANCES FOR ANY NEW GOVERNMENT CONTRACTS.
JEFFREY, I KNOW THE DOWNSIDE...
...WHAT I WANT IS TO HEAR HOW YOU'RE GOING TO TURN IT ALL AROUND.
BRUCE, YOU HIRED ME NOT ONLY BECAUSE I'M A SCIENTIST--
--BUT BECAUSE OF MY MEDIA WORK, AND THE FIRST THING I LEARNED IN TELEVISION...
...IS THAT THINGS TAKE TIME. LOTS OF TIME. IF YOU TRUST ME, WE'LL MAKE IT WORK.
DR. FRASER, YOU HAVE AN ELEVEN FIFTEEN APPOINTMENT.
OH, RIGHT, MAYA. THANKS.
TAKE A LOOK AT MY NOTES, BRUCE, THEN TELL ME IF WE'RE SEEING EYE-TO-EYE.
YOU'RE THE DOCTOR.
WAYNETECH'S IN YOUR HANDS.
LUCIUS, WHAT DO YOU THINK?
HE'S GOT MY VOTE. WHAT'S YOUR VERDICT?
I DON'T KNOW, LUCIUS.
FOR THE MOMENT I'LL ABSTAIN.
4

...THE RESIDUE INDICATES A THERMOCHEMISTRY.
BOTH CHEMICAL DEFLAGRATION AND CHEMICAL TRANSFORMATIONS WERE USED TO OBTAIN CONFLAGRATION.
THE EXPLOSION?


YES, THE EXPLOSION DEFLAGRATION DEALS WITH CHEMICALS THAT BURN EXPLOSIVELY.
TRANFORMATION INDICATES CHEMICALS THAT ACHIEVE DETONATION THROUGH A SERIES OF HIGH-TEMPERATURE REACTIONS.
BUT SOMETHING STILL HAD TO SET THEM OFF...?

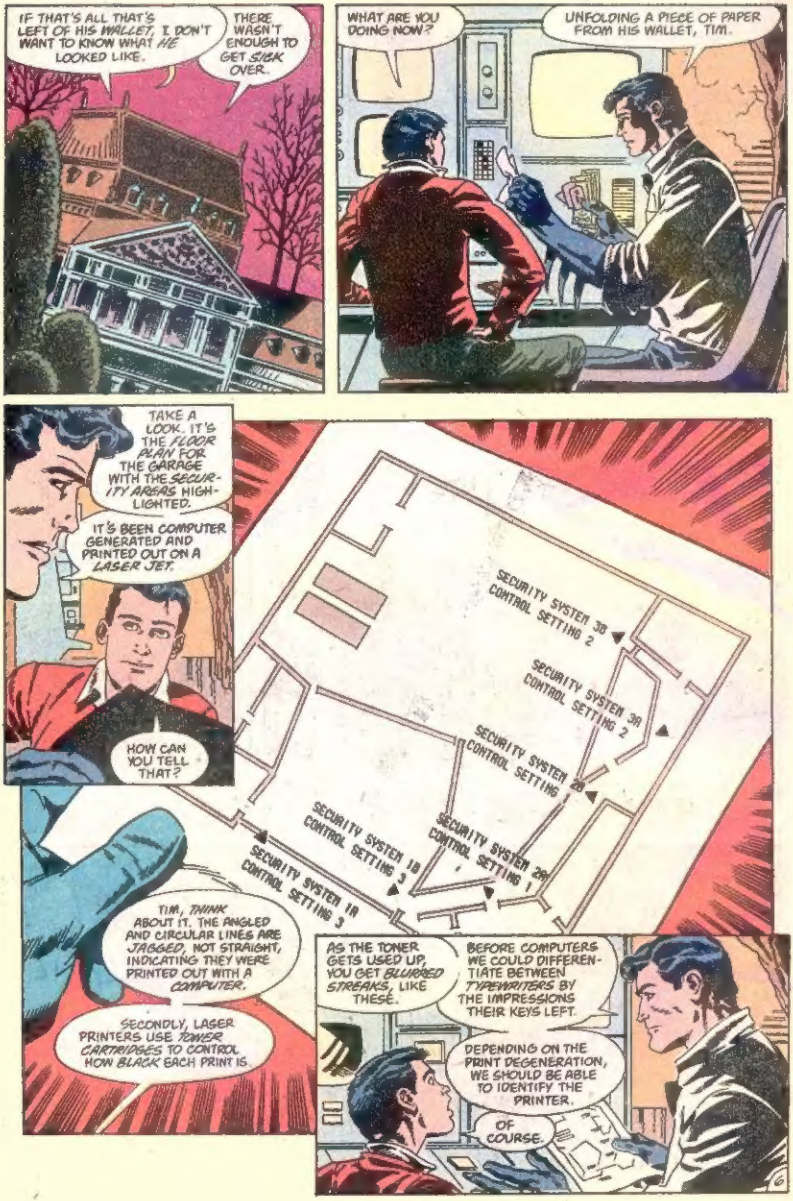
I'D VENTURE TO SAY A LOW EXPLOSIVE ELECTRONICALLY DETONATED THE CHAIN REACTIONS.
ELECTRONIC DETONATOR?
LOOK AT THE FLASH BURN ON WHAT WAS PART OF HIS CERVICAL VERTEBRAE.
IIS NECK?


YES, HIS NECK. FROM THE BURN DIRECTION AND INTENSITY, WHATEVER CAUSED THE DETONATION...
...WAS MOST LIKELY TRIGGERED HERE.


WE'RE DOING A FULL ANALYSIS OF THE CHEMICAL RESIDUE, BUT MY EDUCATED GUESS IS WE'LL FIND SODIUM, POTASSIUM NITRATE...
...AND VARIOUS COMPOSITE PROPELLANTS SUCH AS AMMONIUM AND PERCHLORATE, ALONG WITH THE APPROPRIATE BINDERS AND STABILIZERS, OF COURSE.
UMMM. OF COURSE.

WHOEVER CONSTRUCTED THE MECHANISM USED HAD TO BE WELL VERSED IN MICRO-CIRCUITRY, PHYSICS AND CHEMISTRY.
THAT'S MOVING INTO THE TERRITORY OF SCIENCE, AND BEYOND THE SCOPE OF MOST EXPLOSIVE EXPERTS.

MAD SCIENTISTS. GREAT.
THE STORY OF MY LIFE.

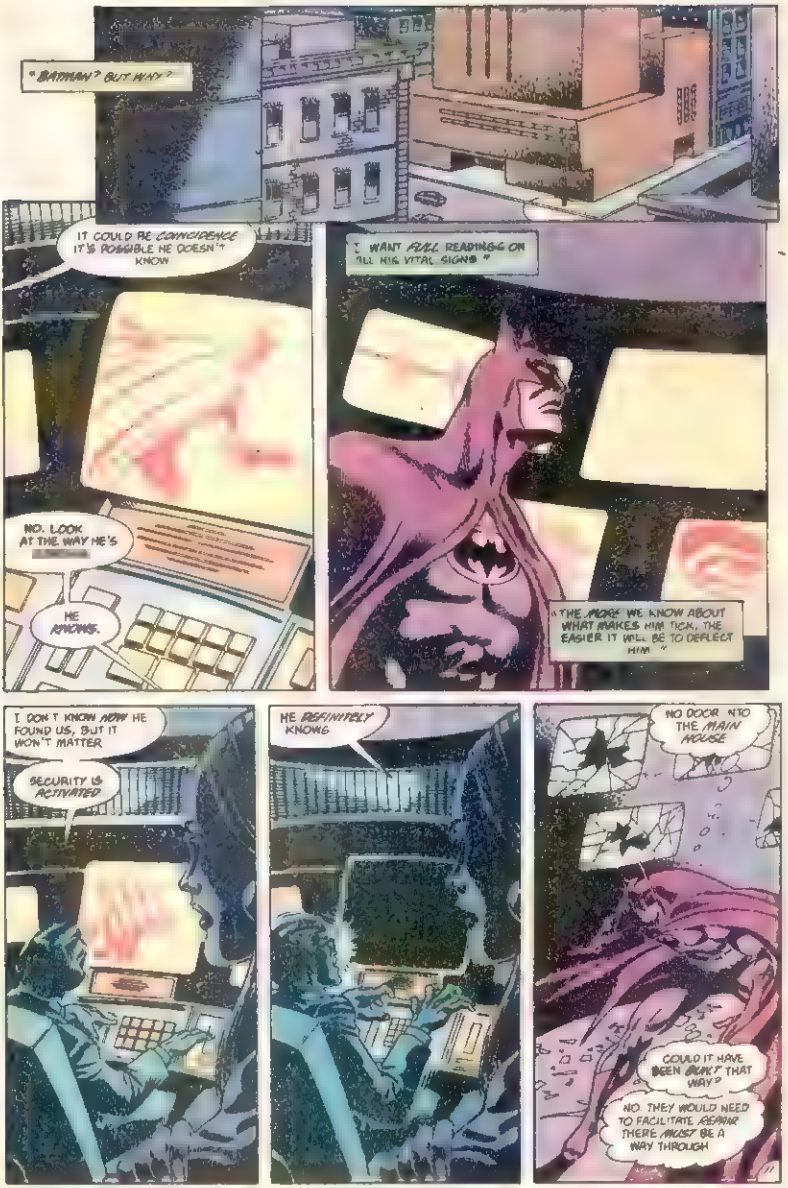

IF THAT'S ALL THAT'S LEFT OF HIS WALLET, I DON'T WANT TO KNOW WHAT HE LOOKED LIKE.
THERE WASN'T ENOUGH TO GET SICK OVER.
WHAT ARE YOU DOING NOW?
UNFOLDING A PIECE OF PAPER FROM HIS WALLET, TIM.
TAKE A LOOK. IT'S THE FLOOR PLAN FOR THE GARAGE WITH THE SECURITY AREAS HIGHLIGHTED.
IT'S BEEN COMPUTER GENERATED AND PRINTED OUT ON A LASER JET.
HOW CAN YOU TELL THAT?
SECURITY SYSTEM 3B CONTROL SETTING 2
SECURITY SYSTEM 3A CONTROL SETTING 2
SECURITY SYSTEM 2B CONTROL SETTING 1
SECURITY SYSTEM 2A CONTROL SETTING 1
SECURITY SYSTEM 1B CONTROL SETTING 3
SECURITY SYSTEM 1A CONTROL SETTING 3
TIM, THINK ABOUT IT. THE ANGLED AND CIRCULAR LINES ARE JAGGED, NOT STRAIGHT, INDICATING THEY WERE PRINTED OUT WITH A COMPUTER.
SECONDLY, LASER PRINTERS USE TONER CARTRIDGES TO CONTROL HOW BLACK EACH PRINT IS.
AS THE TONER GETS USED UP, YOU GET BLURRED STREAKS, LIKE THESE.
BEFORE COMPUTERS WE COULD DIFFERENTIATE BETWEEN TYPEWRITERS BY THE IMPRESSIONS THEIR KEYS LEFT.
DEPENDING ON THE PRINT DEGENERATION, WE SHOULD BE ABLE TO IDENTIFY THE PRINTER.
OF COURSE.

I JUST DON'T BELIEVE YOU. YOU DON'T MISS ANYTHING.
YOU CAN TRAIN YOURSELF TO DO THE SAME, TIM.
OKAY, SO THINK. WHAT AM I DOING NOW?
YOU TOLD ME WHAT HAPPENED AT THE CORONER'S OFFICE.
SO YOU MUST BE CROSSING-CHECKING COMPANIES THAT SELL THOSE CHEMICALS.
AND?
AND...
AND WE FIND SCIENTISTS WITH SPECIALTIES IN MICROCIRCUITRY, PHYSICS AND CHEMISTRY.
EXCELLENT.
YOU'RE CATCHING ON.
NOW WE SET THE COMPUTER TO CROSS REFERENCE DATA BASES AND SIGNAL US WHEN IT'S DONE.
NOW WHAT?
NOW WE WAIT!
UNNNHHH.
WE'VE EXERCISED YOUR MIND. NOW LET'S GET YOUR BODY IN SHAPE.
I'M IN PRETTY GOOD SHAPE.

WHAT WE DO DEMANDS DISCIPLINE, CAYMAN, IN BOTH MENTAL AND PHYSICAL ARENAS.
EACH MUST DEVELOP TOGETHER. WE CAN'T FAVOR ONE OVER THE OTHER.
TIM...
...HAVE YOU SPOKEN TO YOUR PARENTS ABOUT YOUR BEING HERE?
MY PARENTS?
ACTUALLY... I DON'T KNOW WHERE THEY ARE NOW.
DAD'S A CORPORATE EXEC. AND THEY GO ALL OVER THE WORLD. THEY HAVEN'T CALLED IN A WHILE.
DO THEY DO THAT OFTEN? NOT CALL?
IT'S NO BIG DEAL. THEY'RE SO BUSY. I GUESS THEY FORGET.
BESIDES, THEY'VE GOT PROBLEMS, TOO.
PROBLEMS?
THEY'VE BEEN FIGHTING. OR THEY WERE.
THEY WERE HOPING THIS TRIP WOULD MAKE THINGS WORK.
...OTHERWISE...
I'M SORRY, TIM.
IF I CAN HELP IN ANY WAY...
...I'LL...
BING
BING
BI
I THINK THAT'S THE COMPUTER.
8

I THINK IT'S READY.
I GUESS SO.
I... IS THAT THE LIST?
YEAH.
ALLEN, ALFRED A. New Yo
BESTER, THOMAS C. Los A
DIAZ, JUANITA L. El Paso
DIMANO, JOSEPH. Cincinnati
FRASER, JEFFREY R. Gotham
GRAVILLE, EVE New York City
LAO, CHU. Chicago
BRUCE, LOOK!
DR. FRASER'S NAME.
BRUCE, IS IT HIM? DO YOU REALLY THINK IT'S FRASER?
BRUCE?
WHAT ARE YOU DOING, BRUCE?
PLEASE ANSWER ME?
KLIK
THE SAME TONER STREAK.
CRIMESMITH'S PLANS WERE PRINTED BY JEFFREY FRASER'S LASER JET.
I WANT A LIST OF ALL PROPERTY OWNED BY FRASER OR HIS COMPANY. THEN ASK ALFRED TO TAKE YOU BACK TO YOUR SCHOOL.
I'M GOING OUT TONIGHT.

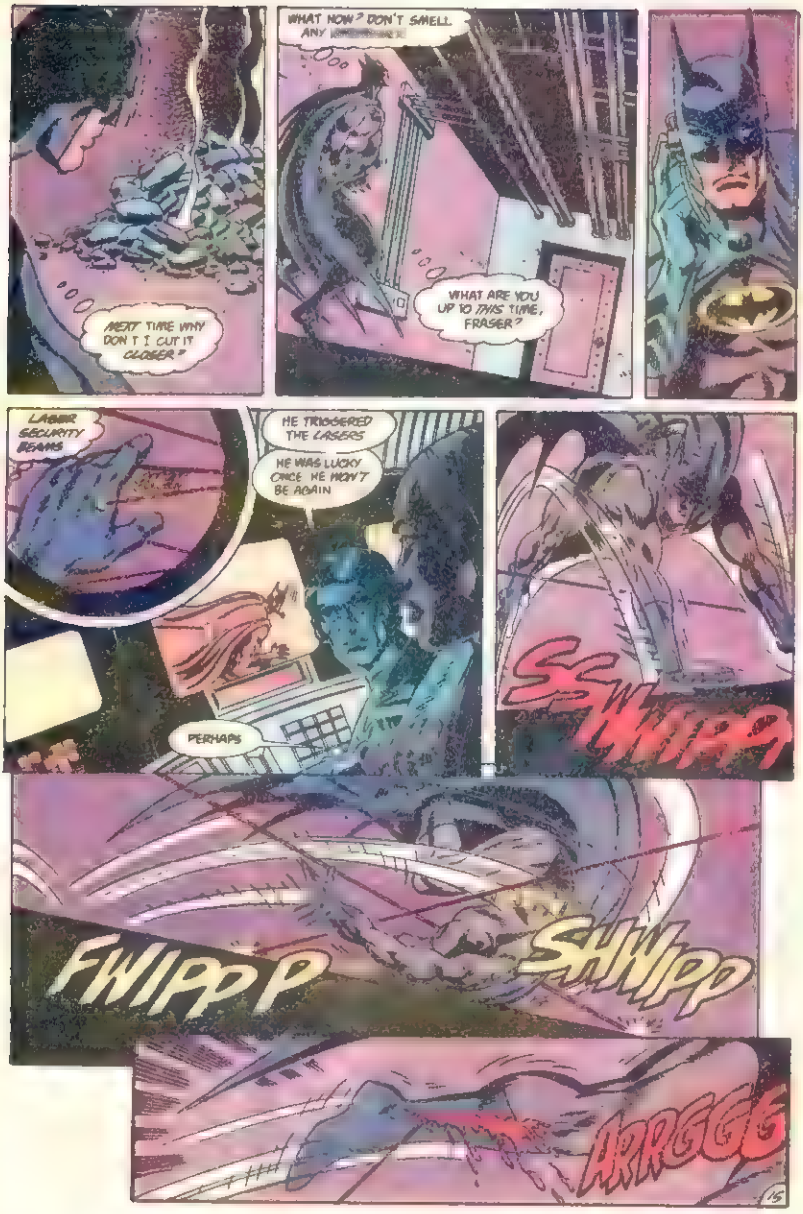
THE SHIRT IS REINFORCED WITH AN ARMOR PLATE SEWN BENEATH THE GOLDEN SHIELD. HE SLIPS IT ON AND FEELS AT HOME NOW
THE COWL IS BOTH SOFT AND SOLID TO HIS TOUCH. ITS CROWN AND BACK REINFORCED. ITS FACE FORM FITTING AND TIGHT
HE EXHALES SMOOTHLY AS IT FITS INTO PLACE AND LOOKS UNDER HIS OWN HIS BREATHING QUIETS WITH ANTICIPATION
THE UTILITY BELT HAS ITS KIDNEY MEDICAL KIT AND RADIO ALREADY IN PLACE. HE STUDIES THE SHELVES TO DETERMINE WHAT ELSE HE MIGHT NEED
THE RITUAL IS SOMBRE, NEVER BROKEN. PREPARATION MUST BE THOROUGH. THERE MUST NOT BE A SINGLE MISTAKE AND IT IS OVER.
HE TAKES ONE LONG DEEP BREATH
HE IS READY


"BATMAN? BUT HOW?"
IT COULD BE COINCIDENCE IT'S POSSIBLE HE DOESN'T KNOW
NO. LOOK AT THE WAY HE'S
HE KNOWS.
I WANT FULL READINGS ON ALL HIS VITAL SIGNS "
"THE MORE WE KNOW ABOUT WHAT MAKES HIM TICK, THE EASIER IT WILL BE TO DEFLECT HIM "
I DON'T KNOW HOW HE FOUND US, BUT IT WON'T MATTER
SECURITY IS ACTIVATED
HE DEFINITELY KNOWS
NO DOOR INTO THE MAIN HOUSE
COULD IT HAVE BEEN BROKE THAT WAY?
NO. THEY WOULD NEED TO FACILITATE AGAIN THERE MUST BE A WAY THROUGH

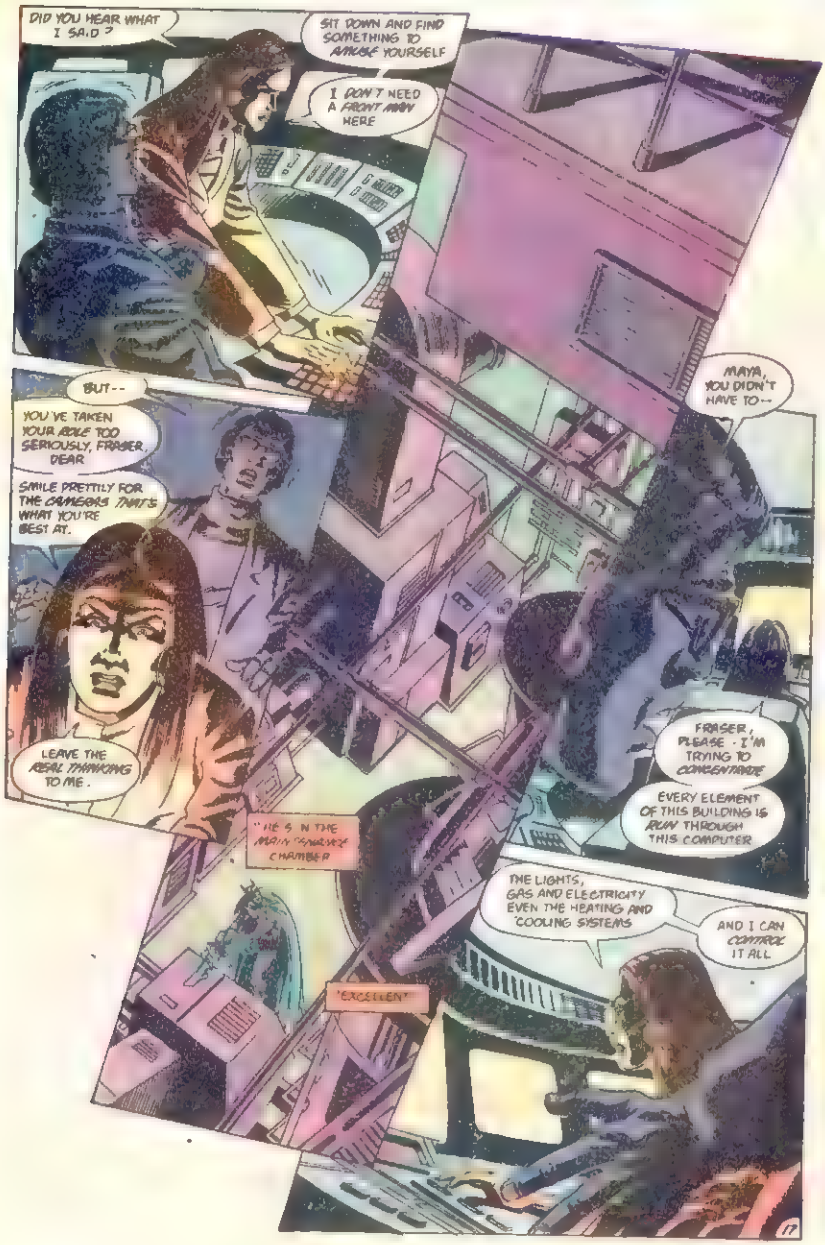
HOW DO I GET PAST THE SECURITY OF A SECURITY SPECIALIST?
HE MINED THE FLOOR WITH PHOSPHORUS BLASTS
WHOOMP
THEY COULD BURN THROUGH ME BUT LEAVE HIS LABORATORY VIRTUALLY UN-TOUCHED!
FLOOR'S HEATING UP HE'S SETTING UP A CHEMICAL REACTION!
WHOOMP
WHOOMP
WHOOM
HEATING UP THE FLOOR BEGAN THE CHEMICAL TRANSFORMATION
THE ADDITIONAL HEAT OF MY FOOTSTEPS IS THE CATALYST THAT INSURES THE PHOSPHORUS EXPLOSIONS FOLLOW ME
IT TAKES A SECOND FOR THE CHEMICAL REACTION TO SET OFF THE BLASTS...
BAWHOO
AAUGH! GOT TO SMOTHER IT BEFORE IT BURNS THROUGH MY UNIFORM!
UNNHHHH
JUST IN TIME TO--
12

MY BODY HEAT
WILL SET OFF THE REST OF THE CHEMICALS
WHOOMP
WHOOMP
CAN'T STAY ON THE GROUND
THOK
WHOOMP
WHERE DID WE MAKE OUR MISTAKE?
WHATEVER IT WAS, IT COULDN'T HAVE BEEN BIG.
WITH HIM IT DOESN'T HAVE TO BE.

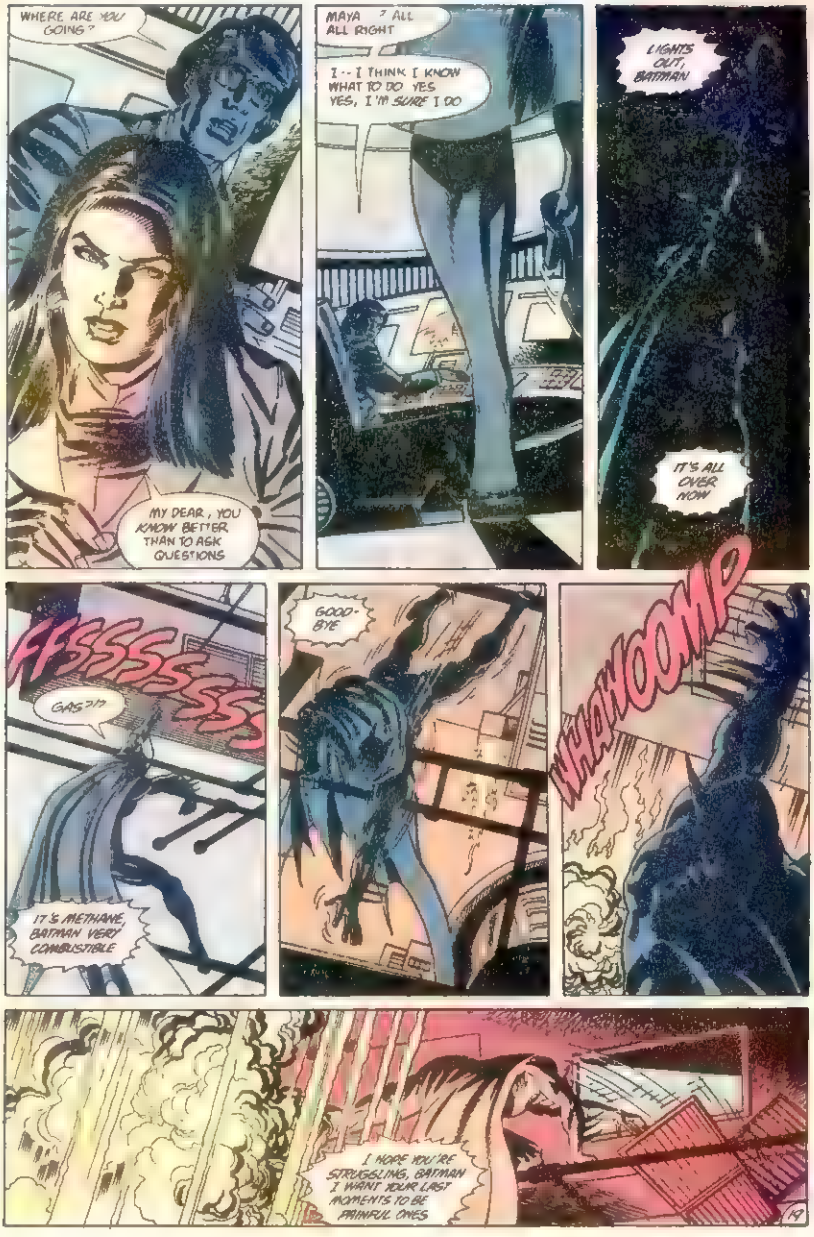
YOU MADE A MISTAKE, FRAGER.
NEVER USE THE SAME MURDER METHOD TWICE
I CAME PREPARED.
LIQUID NEON. IT'S A REFRIGERANT USED IN CRYOGENICS.
AND COLD ENOUGH TO MOMENTARILY LOWER THE TEMPERATURE OF WHATEVER CHEMICALS YOU USED.
BAWKAAW


NEXT TIME WHY DON'T I CUT IT CLOSER?
WHAT NOW? I DON'T SMELL ANY
WHAT ARE YOU UP TO THIS TIME, FRASER?
LASER SECURITY BEAMS
HE TRIGGERED THE LASERS
HE WAS LUCKY ONCE HE WON'T BE AGAIN
PERHAPS
SSWHIPP
FWIPPP
SHWIPPP
ARRGGG
15

"WE'VE GOT HIM. I'M ADJUSTING THE LASER PATH NOW."
SKEEEE-AKAK!
SKKK
"WH-WHAT'S HE DOING?"
I CAN'T SEE HIM! THE LASERS HEATED UP THE WATER--
--HE'S STEAMED UP THE ROOM.
I CAN'T AIM THE BEAMS!
SSSZZWIP
"WHAT'S HE DOING?"
"SIT DOWN YOU FOOL. DON'T YOU HEAR THE DOOR ALARM? HE'S USING THE LASERS TO BURN THROUGH!"


DID YOU HEAR WHAT I SAID?
SIT DOWN AND FIND SOMETHING TO AMUSE YOURSELF
I DON'T NEED A FRONT MAN HERE
BUT--
YOU'VE TAKEN YOUR ROLE TOO SERIOUSLY, FRASER, DEAR
SMILE PRETTILY FOR THE CAMERAS THAT'S WHAT YOU'RE BEST AT.
LEAVE THE REAL THINKING TO ME.
"HE'S IN THE MAIN COMPUTER CHAMBER
"EXCELLENT"
MAYA, YOU DIDN'T HAVE TO--
FRASER, PLEASE - I'M TRYING TO CONCENTRATE
EVERY ELEMENT OF THIS BUILDING IS RUN THROUGH THIS COMPUTER
THE LIGHTS, GAS AND ELECTRICITY EVEN THE HEATING AND COOLING SYSTEMS
AND I CAN CONTROL IT ALL

"HE'S TRYING TO MAKE IT TO THE VENT"
"HE SIMPLY WON'T"
HISSSS
UNHHHH! STEAM!
SNIKT
CAN'T ANYTHING STOP HIM?
HE IS ASTOUNDING! IT IS AS IF HE IGNORES PAIN
FRASER, TAKE OVER THE COMPUTER DO SOMETHING DEADLY WITH IT
18


WHERE ARE YOU GOING?
MY DEAR, YOU KNOW BETTER THAN TO ASK QUESTIONS
MAYA? ALL RIGHT
I--I THINK I KNOW WHAT TO DO. YES. YES, I'M SURE I DO
LIGHTS OUT, BATMAN
IT'S ALL OVER NOW
FSSSSSSSS
GAS?!?
IT'S METHANE, BATMAN. VERY COMBUSTIBLE
GOOD-BYE
WHAKOOMP
I HOPE YOU'RE STRUGGLING, BATMAN. I WANT YOUR LAST MOMENTS TO BE PAINFUL ONES.

BATMAN?
HOW DO YOU DO IT? HOW?!?
FOOL! DON'T YOU KNOW WHAT YOU'VE DONE? THE FLAMES -- THEY'LL IGNITE THE CHEMICALS IN THE LAB
GET OUT OF HERE NOW!
I SAID, COME!
NO! WHERE'S MAYA? SHE HAS TO COME WITH US.
MAYA? MAYA?!?
FRASER! YOU IDIOT -- COME WITH ME!
I CAN'T SAVE --
MAYA, PLEASE -- WHERE ARE YOU? COME TO ME! MAYA!?!
20

FRASER, SHE LEFT YOU! SHE SAVED HERSELF.
COME WITH ME!
NO! SHE WOULDN'T DO THAT!
YOU'RE LYING! YOU'RE LYING!
BAM
SHE TOOK CARE OF ME! SHE WAS THE ONE WHO--
BAM BAM
NO, MY DEAR...
... CONFESSION IS NOT GOOD FOR THE SOUL.
BAM BAM BAM BAM BA
21

BAM BAM B
ARGHHHH
FRASER! FRASER!!
THE END?
NEXT: RETURN OF THE BEAST!

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L-5318

Dear Denny and KC,

I was greatly impressed by Marv Wolfman's handling of Two-Face in the first chapter of "A Lonely Place of Dying" in BATMAN #440. Many writers have tried to get across the unique manis of Harvey Dent over the years, but this is, I think, the most convincing I have ever read. But if Marv painted such a vivid picture of the driven man that Two-Face is, he did an even more successful job showing the human side of Batman. The lecture from Alfred was most enjoyable (for me, that is, not for Bruce), and the value of the loyal retainer was clearly shown in the effect his words had on the Dark Knight later. This story is the turning point for Batman, the beginning of his return to a form of sanity he hasn't known since the death of Robin. I hope what I've heard is true, that Marv Wolfman is staying on BATMAN for awhile. This is Wolfman at his best.

And if Marv is at his best, Jim Aparo isn't exactly lagging behind, either! Jim and Mike DeCarlo have been improving as a team constantly since their return to these pages, but this issue, both turned in their finest work to date. I still desire to see Jim ink his own stuff, but if current standards are maintained or exceeded, I won't be writing any letters of complaint!

Now to the overall depiction of Batman, raised in the letters page by Chris Small. I tend to agree with you, KC, in that I don't want to see Batman as a killer. I have said before that MY Batman is a friend of the innocent as much as a foe of the guilty. If Batman were to go around offing his enemies as a matter of routine, no citizen of Gotham would feel safe. And there is credence in the "sinking to their level" axiom that Chris scorns. John Byrne had something to say on this point in a recent issue of Comics Interview. John clings to the belief that superheroes are basically BETTER than the average person and that they symbolize the best that is in mankind. They are willing to put their lives on the line time and time again because it is the RIGHT THING TO DO, not just for reasons of personal vengeance. I would like to think that this applies to Batman as much as any other superhero. I believe that Batman wanted to kill the Joker at the time of their most recent battle, because he was consumed by hatred at the slaying of Jason Todd. Time has enabled Bruce Wayne to "cool down" somewhat and he now wants the Joker brought to book for ALL his many crimes, but not to kill him—"A life for a life" is not justice, it is vengeance, and Batman believes in justice above all else.

Thank you for a great issue and for taking time to read this. I'll see you in thirty.

Best,
Dale Coe
56 Whitecross Road
Warrington, Cheshire
WA5 1LR ENGLAND

As you may imagine, Chris Small's letter in BATMAN #440 generated a flood of response, and we'll do our best to fit as much as we can into the next two pages.

* * * * *

Hey, KC—

I enjoyed BATMAN #440 and, in particular, the treatment Alfred was given. He's a major part of the Batman mythos and I think he should be utilized much more in the current stories than he ever was in the past. And if Bruce doesn't need the two people who care the most about him in the world (namely Alfred and Dick) *now*, he certainly won't *ever* need them.

And, in reference to Chris Small's comments, I agree and disagree with them. Just because Batman is known as a "Dark Avenger of the Night" doesn't mean he has a rep as a murderer. And, if he did take the law into his own hands in the DC Universe, that's exactly what he'd be—a murderer, no more, no less. But, in the Joker's case, I'd have to make an exception.

After all the Joker has done to countless numbers of innocents, and taking into consideration the personal losses he's inflicted on Batman himself and his immediate friends, the Gordons, I think Batman should snap the punk's neck with absolutely no remorse at all. And I wouldn't consider him a murderer, either.

Seeya at Mundan's,

Uncle Elvis
17650 Dawson Road
Dawson Springs, KY 42408

* * * * *

Dear DC,

I felt saddened to read the letter from Chris Small in BATMAN #440.

One glorious thing about fictional characters is that they can be many things to many people. Thus, Denny O'Neil's Batman is equally as valid as Bill Finger's; Adam West's version as valid as Michael Keaton's. Another wonderful thing about fictional characters is that they take on a life of their own, apart from any creative input. The bottom line is that Batman, as a character, is not a killer.

Batman is a fascinating character whose potential has only begun to be tapped in spite of fifty years of interpretations. An essential part of the character is that he has chosen to operate *outside* the law rather than above it. To an extent, he is an aide to the police! If there is one lesson mankind learns from the twentieth century, it must be that the end does not justify the means ... ever!

I realize that we live in a violent world but I think we should admire Batman for not wanting to "cross the line," not call him a wimp!

The contention that killing or at least wanting to kill villains would make the character more interesting is ludicrous. If you really must read about some psychotic loon who puts on a costume, guns down scores of criminals and thinks that makes him a hero, there are several characters like that around in comics today. In some cases, they're well written and nicely drawn ... but they sure as hell ain't the Batman and they never will be!

Sincerely,
Steven Thompson
Covington, KY

* * * * *

Dear Den,

You've been doing with the Batman what I feared most. YOU ARE MAKING THE DARK KNIGHT INTO A WIMP. Batman is grim, nasty, and isn't afraid to bloody his knuckles. Frank Miller proved through DARK KNIGHT that Batman can have a Robin and still be all of the above. I love Batman with all of my soul, but not the Batman you've been displaying. I like the true Batman—the Dark Knight.

Brian Adoline
254 Fairway Drive
Newton, NC 28658

* * * * *

Dear Denny,

In the lettercol of BATMAN #440, Chris Small says that Batman should be a killer. He writes: "How can Batman be a Dark Avenger of the Night if he doesn't even want to kill his worst enemy?" and "Batman should also kill the really BAD criminals (murderers, rapists, pedophiliacs)" and a wealth of other things that worry me no end. Mr. Small's letter disquiets me on two levels. First, he has misinterpreted the character of the Batman. But second, and more impor-

tant, he obviously holds a woefully irresponsible view of Batman's place in the world outside comics.

There is no doubt in my mind: Batman is NOT a killer. It is as simple as that. The character's psyche is set up to preclude murder. This *inability* to be a killer is crystal clear in the third issue of Frank Miller's DARK KNIGHT RETURNS, wherein Batman, in his final confrontation with the Joker, cripples his ghoulish enemy but is unable to kill him. The Joker taunts Batman, telling him that he always knew the Dark Knight could never kill him. It is this fundamental truth that haunts Batman throughout the rest of the story. Miller's Batman desperately wants to be a killer, but cannot become one. That is the conflict in the Batman's psyche.

Granted, Batman has recently been contemplating his morality and his mortality. He has wanted to kill. But he is not a killer and will (I hope and demand) eventually realize this about himself. I hope that he comes to a point where he can say, as his much-missed counterpart from Earth-Two did in BRAVE AND BOLD #197, "I have long since given up trying to find any meaning in death. The meaning is in life, not death..."

But it is important to note that Batman *must not* be a killer. That is an important point, so I'll say it again. BATMAN MUST NOT BE A KILLER.

Over the summer I worked in a comic book store. With the Batman Movie raking in zillions at the box office, we had many new customers come in looking for Bat-items. All of them were children, no more than eight. One day, a group of these eight-year-old children came into the store and, inspired by the apparent on-screen death of the Joker, began to argue about which Batman villain they would most like to see die. They were constructing meticulously-crafted, logical arguments about why Catwoman should be shot, or why the Riddler should be pushed off a building. And they were no older than eight.

Eight-year-old kids do not know everything about life, and yet they were discussing death like experts! What's wrong with this picture? What's worse is that we're teaching these children about death. All of us in the comic book industry. All of us who write, plot, pencil, ink, color, letter, edit, print, package, sell, buy, and read these comic books are responsible."

I am not saying that violence and murder and mayhem in comics should be abolished—books like GREEN ARROW, THE QUESTION, and SANDMAN thrive on such controversy, after all, but I am saying that violence and murder and mayhem in BATMAN comics must be handled twice as responsibly as anywhere else. Why? Because The Batman is an American Cultural Icon, and as such, everything he is will seep, by osmosis, into our culture, whether we like it or not. (To call Batman a cultural icon is not exaggeration; if he were not, would The New York Times carry stories on his partner's death?)

If Batman becomes a killer, because he is an American Icon, the message will sweep the nation that our hero kills. It will be easier for our eight-year-olds to believe that since Batmen kills and he is a hero, it is OK to kill, than it would be for them to realize that since Batman kills, he can no longer be called a hero (in the classical sense, at least). And if all of us in comics give our children a hero who is a killer, will our consciences allow us to live with ourselves?

The Batman stories that are being written now, from "A Death in the Family" through BATMAN: YEAR THREE through "A Lonely Place of Dying" are some of the best Batman tales ever created, all of them dealing with that fundamental angst, that irreconcilable conflict within the Batman: he may want to kill, but his conscience will not let him. But let us make no mistake: Batman is not and MUST NOT become a killer.

I don't want to sound like some arch-conservative twit who is just this side of favoring censorship and restricting NEA funding from artists judged obscene. But we are dealing with children here, let's face it. If we must teach violence, let's do it responsibly.

Yours most sincerely,
Ali T. Kokmen
Box 1542
Brown University
Providence, RI 02912

I think the best way to end this discussion is to let three of the Batman's biggest fans have the floor. I think their perception of what the Batman truly is speaks volumes...

*****

Dear Batman,

I love you. I wish that I can see you in real life. I saw you in the movie. I think that you are cute. I had a dream of you. It was when you were my dad and you came back from a place and hugged me. I could not marry you because I'm only 8.

Love,
Sarah Heller
124 Rutledge, Box 111
Pentwater, MI 49449

*****

Dear Batman,

I think you are cute. I love you. I wish that I can see you in real life. I want to see your movie. I made a pin of you to wear. You are neat.

Love,
Amy Bonine
269 S. Wythe, Box 314
Pentwater, MI 49449

*****

Dear Batman,

My name is William Beatty. I live in San Jose, California with my mommy, daddy, brother Wyatt, dog Sherree, and kitty Charlie. I'm 4½ years old. I want to live with you in the Batcave. I also would like you to come and get me in the Batmobile. Thank you very much.

Sincerely,
William Beatty

*****

NEXT ISSUE: The Russians have a problem. A renegade agent, a protege of the dreaded KGBeast, is murdering the proponents of Glasnost, using the KGBeast's secret methods—methods only The Batman can combat. The story is by Marv Wolfman, the art is by Jim Aparo and Mike DeCarlo, and it all lurks behind a stunning cover by Brian Bolland!

—KC Carlson
(Recovering from Christmas)

From the Den

Unless you're a veteran comics reader, you probably haven't heard of Ron Whyte. About 23 years ago, he was an assistant to Stan Lee for a summer, and later did writing for Marvel, DC and, I think, the now defunct Warren Publications.

Then Ron took his talent elsewhere. In the ensuing two decades, he wrote plays, movies, novels, short stories, reviews, journalism. He was playwright in residence at the Actors Studio, theater and film editor of the American Book Review, a Rockefeller Playwrighting fellow, a National Endowment for the Arts fellow and a Shubert Foundation fellow. He earned an M.F.A. from the Yale School of Drama and a Master of Divinity degree from the Union Theological Seminary. He won four Joseph Jefferson Awards and he was nominated for a Pulitzer.

He was the bravest man I ever met. I don't think there were many days of his adult life that Ron was without pain. Nature had been cruel to him. He once said that his body was "the battle of Antietam the morning after," but he refused to let his infirmities deprive him of anything life had to offer. He did not complain, ever. He joked, yes, and the humor could be dark indeed, but I never heard a word of self-pity from him.

I last saw him about four years ago. He was a visiting scholar at his alma mater, Yale, at the time, and, as always, he was looking for new projects. We met at a coffee house in Soho and discussed the possibility of co-teaching a college-level course in pulp literature. I wish we had: I would have learned much from the experience, and it would have been fun. Before we could meet again, though, I got busy with a new job and decided I couldn't accommodate the preparation the course would have required. But I always intended to get back to Ron, to do something with him—the course, or a book.

Last month I heard from a mutual friend that Ron had died.

I wasn't surprised. But I was sad, and I didn't know how to mourn him. I still don't. Maybe the best I can do is write these few words, remember him occasionally and, when I do, try to be braver than I am.

DENNIS